# Nothing is permanent

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Abstract: The workshop "Snapshots of Change: Assessing Social Transformations in Qualitative Research" (October 23–24, 2015) dealt with methodological approaches, scopes of relevance, and lines of causality when studying change in qualitative research settings.

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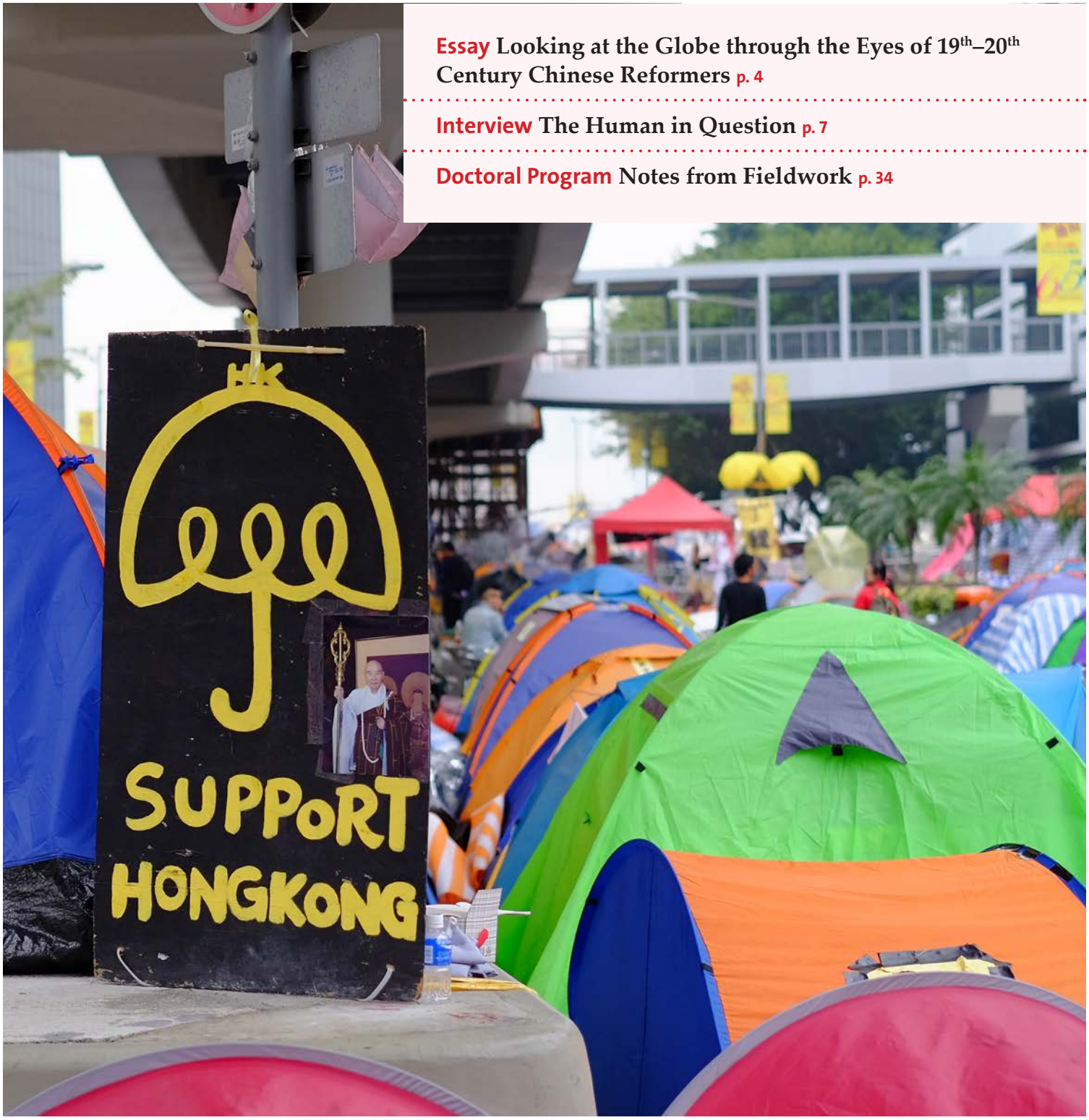

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**Cover**

Civil disobedience in Admiralty, Hong Kong, August 2014

Photo: Brigit Knüsel

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# Nothing is Permanent

**The workshop "Snapshots of Change: Assessing Social Transformations in Qualitative Research" (October 23–24, 2015) dealt with methodological approaches, scopes of relevance, and lines of causality when studying change in qualitative research settings.**

Thiruni Kelegama and Madlen Kobi

Ever since the increase of protest movements that came to prominence since 2011, the issue of change and its assessment has become a prominent topic in scientific research. In this context, the link between protest and change has become a recurrent feature, and has been influenced immensely by researchers' own interests and political engagement. By focusing on the notions of "change" and "social transformation," this workshop aimed to reflect critically upon and discuss how we deal methodologically and theoretically with the notion of "change" in qualitative research. Historical and diachronic timelines assume that change happens on a chronological scale with linear and narrative qualities. How, though, can we concretely assess social change when conducting qualitative research, which is based on case studies often revealing surprising, unconventional and multiple approaches to change? Convened by Yasmine Berriane, Aymon Kreil, Dorothea Lüddeckens, Melek Saral, and Thiruni Kelegama (all University of Zurich), the workshop involved reflections on change based on a broad range of qualitative data in paper and poster presentations.

### Non-linear change

We often take for granted that change is intrinsic to the social processes that we study. From a socio-anthropological point of view, the functionalist and structuralist assumptions of a rather static society (over against the diachronic emphases among evolutionists and diffusionists) have been replaced by more dynamic, multi-vocal perspectives on society and on social change. Flexible and individual biographies are seen as linked to collective temporalities in complex and multilayered, sometimes non-traceable and non-linear ways. Rather than presupposing a linear conception of change, the workshop participants assessed notions of social change in multiple ways. Irene Bono (University of Torino) approached the nation of Morocco as an independent object from the perspective of one individual. By reconstructing life situations in "biographical fieldwork" through the lens of one informant's analysis of objects, Bono used these traces not in order to underline hegemonic timelines, but rather in order to approach fragmented parts of individual histories. Through the ideas, traces, and experiences of one individual, Bono sought to understand a present view on the development of past events. Daniele Cantini (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg) reflected on different temporalities in explanations of institutional changes at Cairo University, doing so through reshuffling his research materials instead of through an individual biography. He showed that the researcher actually creates chains of events with the background of his own ideas about change, and that the organization of research data is fundamental for assessing the changes one wants to explain. Most workshop participants agreed that there is a co-production of narratives around social change through the intermingling of individual and collective memories. Change is constituted by the researcher's assemblage of narratives, events and actions at different scales.

### Narrating change

The wording of informants, media and literature remind us constantly that change is commonly considered part of everyday social life, forming part of most individual and social narrative data. In her example of change in post-war Vietnam, Rivka Eisner (University of Zurich) emphasized that narratives refer to different paces of change. Change can feel fast or slow. Narratives dealing with the past are not accounts of credible memories and exact facts, but rather are perceptions of change imbued with psychological, physical, and emotional aspects. Through narrative-biographical interviews with adolescents in Morocco, Christoph H. Schwarz (University of Marburg) assesses social change by focusing on the moral economy of intergenerational transmission and the potential spaces for adolescents in their educational environment. Through the central concept of "waithood" (the period of time spent waiting between schooling and employment), Schwarz combined the temporal potentialities for change in order to understand anticipations of change related to the post-revolutionary political situation. David Pichonnaz (University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland / University of Lausanne) retrospectively explained change by sharing insights into the motives of a group of police reformers in Switzerland. Through the exploration of factors like predisposition, cultural capital and heterodox convictions, Pichonnaz referred to the motives of police officers committed to change within an institutional setting. However, as Benjamin Geer (University of Basel) commented, in such a context it is of utmost importance to discuss what we actually mean by "institution," before approaching its "change."

### Methods for assessing change

Part of the discussion revolved around the hierarchy of different ma-

terials used for assessing change. But regardless of the source, the recurring issue of memory, its production, and how to deal with it emerged at several points during the workshop. Confronting interview partners with objects is a commonly reported practice in the research on social change. Sophie Feyder (University of Leiden) used the photographic collection of the South-African photographer Ronald Ngilima when talking with contemporary witnesses about the history of social life of Johannesburg in the 1950s. By constructing a chain of historical events through the photographs, Feyder showed that photos can provide snapshots into the historical period when they were taken. Similarly, Youssef El Chazli (University of Lausanne) reminded us that digital traces can deepen our understanding of various issues and events. In his research, he included Facebook data in order to approach peoples' motives in becoming activists. According to El Chazli, these "explicit traces" on Facebook produce *in vivo* complementary data that can be combined with conventional ethnographic interview and observation data. Concerning methodology, Benedikt Korf (University of Zürich) described narrative data as rather imprecise when it comes to the exact data of events. Although we can retrospectively reconstruct moments through memories, we could not have predicted them. Traces are not always something external to the researcher, but Maria Frederika Malmström (Nordic Africa Institute / New York University) included the relevance of the researcher's body as a receptive instrument that memorizes sounds, smells and vibrations. With the reference to the "sound of silence," she exemplified how the materiality of sound shaped her perception of ongoing political change during the military and police intervention in Cairo in August 2013. When dealing with objects, Philipp Casula (University of Zürich) highlights that the object is not the meaning itself, but that one can approach meaning through the objects. This basic idea aligns with the statement of Bettina Dennerlein (University of Zurich), who mentioned that even though memory takes place in the present, it links to the future by talking about the past. Through analyzing and discussing objects with informants, we learn not only about the past and how it has changed, but also about the present and peoples' perspectives (and expectations) on past events based on their standpoint today.

### Scales of transformation

Working with qualitative interviews and material objects ("traces") implies looking at different levels of transformation. Not only is there an individual level that connects its own (hi-)stories to larger social changes, but also individual, regional and global scales involve narratives of transformation. Anne-Christine Trémon (University of Lausanne) points to continuities and discontinuities that urbanization brings to local place identities in the transformation of a village in Southern China. Trémon makes room for people's conceptions of change in social, economic, cultural and religious areas. The multiple links between individual and social changes are part of a study on nightlife and sexual practices in Morocco by Meriam Cheikh (Free University of Brussels). The political and economic changes on a larger regional scale, localized through the rise of a nightlife economy in Tangier, are here presented as closely related to more freedom for young, especially working class, women in urban economies of intimacy. As Annuska Derks (University of Zurich) pointed out, larger social changes shape the local social realities of these women in creating new opportunities and promises. She refers to multiscalar ethnography where rupture on one level can cause friction at another level. The question of overcoming the challenges of writing about change, while simultaneously dealing with both how and where it happens, was reflected upon by Ulrich Brandenburg (University of Zurich), who looked at the notion of change by highlighting the importance of looking at how different actors represented Japan as a world power. His paper about the Russo-Japanese war took an emic perspective, looking at how this inversion of hierarchies reconstructs patterns of change. Dealing with the question of how to assess change in historical research by looking at the sociological conditions in which the Egyptian intellectual Sayyid Qutb—known today as the pioneer of radical Islam—became revolutionary, Giedre Sabaseviciute (Oriental Institute, Czech Academy of Sciences) showed how Qutb moved from the margins of society to its center. This reconstruction of particular changes and subsequently the connection between individual and collective changes became the focus in this paper.

### Why "change"?

Studying change often highlights the problem of how to name the transformations we observe or find interesting. Above all, the words that are applied to change matter, since they are value-laden and refer frequently to the direction in which a given process is expected to move. Notions such as "development," "transition," "evolution," "progress," "rupture," and "revolution" have often strong normative dimensions. Such norms are related to teleological presuppositions embedded within grand narratives of issues like liberalism, democratization, developmentalism, or socialism. By critically assessing such notions, the workshop succeeded in highlighting areas for future research.